

VZCZCXRO8046
PP RUEHBZ RUEH DU RUEHGI RUEHJO RUEHMA RUEHMR RUEHPA RUEHRN RUEHTRO
DE RUEHYD #0368/01 1061543
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 151543Z APR 08
FM AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8807
INFO RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE 0136
RUEHFSI/DIR FSINFATC
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 YAOUNDE 000368

SIPDIS

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DEPT FOR AF/FO, AF/C, M, S/ES-O/CMS, FLO, AND DS/IP/AF
NFATC FOR FSI/LMS/CMT

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [AEMR](#) [AF](#) [AFIN](#) [AMGT](#) [ASEC](#) [CA](#) [CASC](#) [CM](#) [CMGT](#) [KFLO](#)

SUBJECT: YAOUNDE AUTHORIZED DEPARTURE LESSONS LEARNED: IT
CAN HAPPEN TO YOU

REF: STATE 031997

¶1. (U) Summary: During the last week of February 2008, Cameroon's renowned stability and tranquility of Cameroon were shattered by a spasm of rioting and violence that led Embassy Yaounde to request the authorized departure of eligible family members. Mission Cameroon's lessons learned from this crisis include the importance of clear communication, institutionalized emergency preparation that involves host country authorities, staying ahead of the curve, and making the most of local employee expertise. End Summary.

Trite but True - Communication Counts

¶2. (U) By far, the greatest challenge and frustration for the Mission related to communication issues, particularly those within the Embassy. Disparate mission elements, including our branch office located in Douala which was the epicenter of violence, were hearing constant rumors and a handful of accurate reports which were often compared during our frequent EAC meetings, where key facts and trends were distilled. We found this system worked effectively for decision-making at high levels, created an effective liaison between agencies represented at post, and provided the key information for warden messages, but it did not disseminate and control information internally as well as possible. An issue that came up early in the crisis was rumor control, which we successfully addressed by designating a single "rumint" point of contact to collect and compare information being received. Another challenge post encountered was ambiguity about the information gathering and disseminating role of some sections. The EAC meetings were usually attended by "core" Mission members. As the crisis grew in magnitude and the implications of EAC decisions grew commensurately, Post ensured a broader participation in EAC meetings, which improved communication and coordination within the Mission.

¶3. (U) Post established a Consular Control Center early in the crisis, which helped centralize and control information - but was probably not used to full potential. As a medium-sized Embassy, staff often called one another or the duty officer rather than the control room to seek or share information. We recommend that colleagues facing even a small scale crisis establish and use a control room to institutionalize communication patterns within post and between post and the Department. A robust control room is a critical resource to manage information and can provide good practice for the staff that actually create and man the post,

forcing them to check emergency supply closets, follow procedures, consult crisis reference materials, and manage real calls from real people. Control room staff would also be responsible for maintaining a log, and for doing sitreps, relieving the EAC of those tasks which became cumbersome, in part because our first reports combined analysis with reporting on decisions made at EAC meetings. In our case, by the time the utility of a control room separate from Consular became obvious, the crisis was already subsiding.

14. (U) Another lesson learned was our experience that many people hold unrealistic expectations about what can and should be done in an emergency. It was important to communicate to both Mission employees and private Americans about what assistance they can expect, and under what conditions such assistance would be granted. For example, American citizens are often surprised to learn that evacuation is not a free service, and Embassy families often have questions about when it is appropriate to consolidate in the main Embassy compound rather than in residences.

15. (U) Although Post was fortunate that the regular and cell phone networks never went down, our communications themselves functioned well, and good backup systems were in place with radios and satellite phones. The Peace Corps had good success in sharing information with volunteers via SMS, a system that post is working to extend to cover both Mission employees and private Americans registered with the Consular Section.

Practice = Preparedness

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16. (U) In responding to the crisis, post drew heavily on recent exercises and experiences (assisting in the evacuation of Embassy N'Djamena) as well as on our Emergency Action Plan, and found the resources and training that the Department has made in emergency preparedness to be valuable and effective. Nonetheless, there were a number of areas for improvement that ranged from a need for additional communications gear to the need to update certain contact lists to the limitations of our host-country interlocutors. While our post will address these specifically, the moral of our story is that real emergencies happen when you don't expect them and don't always leave time to make preparations. Also, many shortcomings became apparent only when attempting to actually gain remote access using a FOB, or when we learned that off-duty DOD personnel were not required to file a country clearance request, or when it became evident that planned consolidation points for Peace Corps volunteers were more dangerous than their regular sites. In short, while tabletop exercises are useful in refining plans, drills that require staff to actually execute the plan are necessary to identify hidden difficulties and avoid unnecessary delays during a real crisis.

17. (U) While Post has a strong set of contacts among the police and military authorities, we found that these entities were disorganized and/or ill-prepared to either receive or act upon requests to assist private Americans or other expatriates. As a result, escort assistance was provided in a very ad hoc manner, making the already difficult task of coordinating the movement of expatriates significantly more challenging. Consequently, post is joining with other missions to approach the host government requesting that it establish a central point of contact empowered to coordinate assistance to expatriates. Post has also been prompted by the emergency to re-evaluate possible evacuation routes, and to consider whether private security firms have a useful role to play in assisting expatriates.

Take Care of the Troops and They Will Take Care of You

¶8. (U) First among the things that we believe went well during the crisis was our successful effort to reassure and engage our local staff in responding to the emergency. Many staff made the risky decision to defy the transportation strike and transport colleagues to work, or to walk many miles on foot. The Ambassador herself, in a Town Hall meeting early in the crisis, assured our local employees that their safety, and that of their families, was our first concern. This was immensely important to them. Likewise, the Herculean efforts made by the Budget and Finance Section to ensure that our LES staff was paid in a timely manner made a huge impression upon them. These efforts were rewarded by extra effort on the part of our staff, who were invaluable eyes and ears, and who were instrumental in our efforts to locate and assist private Americans throughout Cameroon.

Hope for the Best but Plan for the Worst

¶9. (U) Among the more valuable aspects of EAC meetings were our discussions of worst-case scenarios. Together with a review of our tripwires, this dialog kept the Mission thinking and planning ahead of a quickly evolving crisis, and set agreed benchmarks to avoid the "frog in the frying pan" mindset. This allowed us to be proactive without being alarmist. Most notably, it gave time for a sober review of the serious decision to move to authorized departure, a step that was taken partially to stay ahead of a potential deterioration in security and avoid an unmanageable rush of departures at a point when departing would be more difficult and/or expensive.

Know Your Wardens and Manage Your Data

¶10. (U) The Consular Section had some specific lessons already shared with the CA bureau and the Crisis Management Support staff, and would urge all colleagues to make time to invest in maintaining a strong warden system that backs up the internet-based registration system (IBRS). In addition to assisting in efforts to locate and assist Americans, wardens are invaluable partners in getting security

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information as they often have broad networks that extend throughout the country and include Cameroonians as well as expatriates. An issue with broader implications for post management was our discovery that the quantum leaps that have been made in the ability of the consular section to track private Americans using the consular taskforce software (CTF) come at the price of additional staffing demands, particularly prior to the establishment of a Washington taskforce to assist. Effectively collecting and managing the huge amounts of data involved is a significant responsibility, and we strongly recommend that posts designate an officer exclusively to this task as early as possible.

Conclusions

¶11. (U) Overall, Post felt well trained and equipped to respond to this emergency, and appreciated the excellent support provided by our colleagues in Washington. The incident was a reminder that appearances can be deceiving, and that in Cameroon, as in many countries in the region, a deep reservoir of discontent fed by political disenfranchisement, unemployment and high commodity prices lies just under the placid surface. Accordingly, all the investments that post has made in developing contingency plans, testing communications gear, and engaging with host

country counterparts have paid handsome dividends. Post will strive to further improve our readiness to respond to a still unsettled situation, and we encourage our colleagues to find ways to build emergency preparations into your routines, and to engage host country counterparts in frank and specific discussions about your own worst-case scenarios.

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